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Commencement address of Prof G H Sabine 3/13/31

ARE STATE UNIVERSITIES DIFFERENT?

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Graduating Class:

The subject about which I am to speak today is perhaps a little off the usual path of commencement addresses. Possibly I may be allowed to plead as an excuse that this occasion is, in a sense, a graduation for me as well as for you, marking as it does almost the close of my membership in the Faculty of this University. For the Ohio State University, if not my alma mater, has been and will be in a very intimate sense my university, because of the happy years of work done here, because of the uniform kindness which I have received at the hands of the students, because of the friendships which it has been my good fortune to form among its distinguished body of teachers, and because of the encouragement and the consideration given me by its governing officers. For all these I give grateful thanks to you, ladies and gentlemen, and to you, sir, as the official head of the University. Perhaps, then, it is not inappropriate that I should talk to you for a few moments, as a friend to friends, about a question of policy which is of deep concern to state universities, and which is, therefore, of interest to all of us as members of one of the greatest of them. It is a question about which your experience as students has given you an excellent opportunity to form an opinion and about which your judgment ought to be of peculiar value. Besides, your opinion is not only valuable; it may also be influential. As alumni you will have no inconsiderable power to make this University what you believe that it ought to be, since you will help to form the really enlightened public opinion of the state about its work. For this reason I intend to anticipate the outcome of today's ceremony and to

speak to you as alumni who both know what the University is doing and also have some vision of what it can and ought to do.

It needs no argument to show that any important policy pursued by the state universities is a matter of major concern to the whole community, both state and nation. For the state universities and institutions like them have come to play an astonishing part in the whole educational work of the country. Of all the students enrolled in schools of collegiate rank more than half are in those which are supported by the states, and even if the teacher-training colleges be omitted, something like 38% are in schools that receive public support. Of all those who, like yourselves, will be graduated this year by the colleges and universities of the United States a very large proportion will receive their degrees either from state universities or from colleges which, like the state universities, are supported chiefly by money raised through taxation and which form a part of the public school system. As a result, the type and the quality of the work done by the state universities will go far to determine what shall count in America as the marks of an educated man or woman. It may well be doubted whether any of the agencies maintained by the states are doing a work which has, actually and potentially, any more significance for the life of the country than that done by the state universities, and indeed, these institutions absorb no small proportion of the revenue which the states collect as taxes and expend upon public services.

The question which you are asked to consider, then, is whether these state universities are different, -- different, that is, from other universities which are supported by private endowments and controlled by boards which may expend their incomes as they see fit,

instead of being supported by money which the state takes from the tax-payers and controlled by boards responsible to the people. Have they a different purpose? Do they furnish higher education to a different class of students? Ought they to offer a different type of work? More especially, ought they to require a different standard of excellence for the degrees by which they mark the successful completion of their courses? And finally, to be explicit, are the state universities justified in setting a really high standard of scholarship, a standard equal to that set by the best privately endowed universities, where such standards have been accompanied by a process of selecting among applicants for admission and of excluding those who are little likely to complete the course with success?

Unless I am mistaken, many persons take for granted that the answer to these questions is a foregone conclusion. They would assume that the state universities are and must be different; that private universities may rightly select their students but that state universities cannot and ought not. The reasons for this view, whether it is sound or not, are perfectly easy to understand. The state universities are a part of the whole public school system, the apex no doubt, but still a part, and a normal continuation of the high schools. Now the American public school system has of necessity assumed the truly colossal task of providing education for the whole population. We have indeed long since ceased to look upon education as a private right. Up to the age of fifteen or thereabouts we have made it compulsory by law. But legal compulsion tells only a small part of the story. We have not unnaturally thought it a distinct gain when a larger and larger proportion of children could be kept in the schools as much beyond the legal age limit as possible. And in fact, the

public desire for education has proved to be more extraordinary than any optimist would have foretold. Never before have so many students carried their education through the high school. Never before have so many graduates of the high schools entered the colleges. The change is undoubtedly a major social phenomenon of the last twenty-five years. It is not strange that the value of the public school system has been measured largely in terms of the number of students it reached.

It is a very easy and simple matter to look at the state universities also from the point of view just sketched. These universities are the next step in the school system beyond the high schools. Hence it is felt to be right and inevitable that the universities should take in a large proportion of those who finish the high school, or indeed, that they should take in all who choose to come. Admission to the state universities, it has been felt, must depend solely upon the volition of high school graduates, and any process of grading or selecting students according to their probable success in doing university work is felt to be out of place. But this argument gets a still further application. As it is felt that the state universities must make admission easy, so it is sometimes felt that they must make remaining in the university easy. If admission is easy, it necessarily follows that many who enter are not really very much interested in the work to be done there; a thousand and one attractions bring students to college besides the desire for further study. It follows also that many will not have the capacities needed to do a very high grade of intellectual work and that their attainments in science or literature or the arts will always be mediocre. Obviously, then, the state universities will have to set their standards accordingly. Probably no one has ever gone to the length of believing

that literally every student who wishes to stay in a state university ought to be permitted to do so, and still less that all who stay ought finally to be given degrees, but there has been at least an inclination to believe that state universities justify themselves to their constituencies by the numbers they teach as much as by the excellence of their courses. In a considerable degree their success tends to be measured by their size.

If this argument is stated baldly, as usually it is not, it amounts to the truly horrible doctrine that democracy means mediocrity. And this is a truly horrible doctrine because, if democracy is condemned not only to be mediocre but to try to be mediocre, then it stands before the world self-condemned. If the friends of democracy put themselves in this position, there is nothing worse that its enemies can do. In education it amounts to saying that state supported schools must teach large numbers, without inquiring whether most of those taught have any real interest in learning, or the ability to learn enough of the subjects taught to make any effective use of them afterward. It means that the most a state university can aim at is a good average standard of educational mass-production, leaving to the privately endowed universities the greater part of those kinds of education which aim at a really high level of scientific or scholarly or artistic accomplishment. It means also that, if we are frank, we should advise the most gifted and ambitious students to seek universities that offer such students the chance to go as fast and as far as possible in developing their unusual talents. If this conclusion is sound, state universities are indeed different, different in the profoundest of all possible ways. For while the private university is free to seek the highest qualitative standard

of education, the state university is condemned not only to reach but actually to seek mediocrity.

Now the conclusion is not sound but fallacious, just as the doctrine which equates democracy with mediocrity is a counsel of despair. In fact, the state universities, and the men who have made them what they are, have never, as a class, accepted the philosophy of mediocrity in all its implications. They have sometimes been forced by circumstances to act upon it, but they have never been guilty of believing it. In spite of difficulties caused by often overwhelming numbers, the history of the state universities over a period of years has been a history of improving quality. Especially in the last two years of their undergraduate courses, and in their professional and graduate schools, the best state universities have offered at least the possibility of a high type of education to a high type of student. Those who have thought clearly about state supported education have never really believed that the universities could justify themselves to the people they serve by offering mediocre education in the mass instead of the best education to those that can profit most from it.

Undoubtedly this problem needs thinking through, especially if we are to see just why the argument that would fix educational mass-production on the state universities is a fallacy. Like most fallacies the argument is not all wrong, for if it were, it would deceive no one. It gets a certain plausibility because it includes some elements of fact that are not only true but important, and these facts must be taken into account by anyone who wishes to form an intelligent opinion about what state universities ought to be. Let us try, first, to concede all that truth requires; in this way the final untruth of the philosophy of mediocrity will be all the more evident. The argument

includes two important facts which it would be folly to deny. In the first place, it is a fact that the state universities must keep in touch with the high schools and that the whole school system must offer continuous and developing lines of study which can be followed straight through from the elementary schools to the top. But this is really no truer of the state universities than of the others, which also must draw the vast majority of their students from the public schools. No privately endowed university which receives undergraduates at all has ever even contemplated closing its doors to properly qualified students who have come up to them through the high schools. In the second place, it is a fact that there now exists a public demand for state supported education which will take a considerable number of students some way beyond the last year of the high school. Such a demand is warranted by the fact that young people need not be forced into gainful occupations at an early age and also by the fact that a complex industrial civilization needs a relatively long period of schooling. At all events the demand is real and a government which is highly responsive to public opinion must grant it.

Let us agree, then, that our state system of education must include continuous lines of study which may be followed from the top to the bottom and that the top, for large and increasing numbers of students, must extend beyond our present high schools. Does it then follow that all education beyond the high school must try to be university education, designed to lead through a four year course to one of the recognized degrees? By no means. There are many lines of education -- almost any form of purely vocational education will serve as an illustration -- which may well be worth a year's time for those who want it and which may properly be given at the state's expense, but which is not and never can be university education. From no point of view is it justifiable to erect such courses into an

imitation of university education. It is not justifiable from the student's point of view because such courses do not lead to a profession or to any form of calling which warrants four years of scholastic preparation. And for the same reason it is not justifiable from the state's point of view. From the point of view of the university it cannot be too strongly insisted that the university has its own work to do, and this work is too important to be endangered by the distraction of trying to do three or four other things at the same time. The university is devoted uniquely to giving advanced instruction in the sciences and the arts and in those professions which need an advanced and an exact knowledge of the sciences and the arts. This work only the university can do and this it must be free to do well.

When we say, then, that more students are to go beyond the high school, we do not say that they must be gathered helter skelter into the university. What seems rather to be indicated is a more differentiation of state supported education at the top, much of it organized in schools other than the university, opening more lines of education beyond the high school and offering more choice according to the interests and the capacities of the students. Just what these lines of education should include is not a question to be settled off-hand, but what is needed is certainly not past finding out. Nor is it beyond our power to give boys and girls more help in finding themselves and placing themselves more quickly in a sort of education suitable to their needs. For the university this means a selective standard of admission planned to take in students who are able to do from the start a good grade of university work.

As things stand, nearly all the students who continue in school after finishing the high school flock into the colleges, and especially into the state university, since the better privately endowed schools

have long since adopted selective standards of admission. Anyone who watches the working of this system year in and year out in the state universities must be profoundly disturbed by what he sees. It is perfectly apparent that very large numbers of entering students are misfits in the university. Many of them are manifestly not much interested in the work which the university offers. Even with the most careful attention to teaching many of them are able to do only very poor work, according to the standard which the university must set for those who go on to a degree. An appalling proportion of those who start follow their course for only a year, or perhaps two years, and never come within sight of a degree. In the majority of cases this is not because the university dismisses them but because they become discouraged, for nothing is more discouraging than to be always trying to do something you cannot do well. Their work fails to satisfy them and they drop out voluntarily.

Thus out of every thousand students who enter this university from high schook, approximately two hundred and fifty, or one-fourth, have failed to return by the fourth quarter following, or the beginning of their sophomore year. Similarly, in the course of another three terms another one-fourth has disappeared, so that the thousand has shrunk to something like five hundred in the junior year. In the end only about one in four or five receives a degree. There are a hundred and seventy-five of you who are to receive your degrees today, but you are the selected remainder from eight or nine hundred who started. Make no mistake about it: education in the state universities is already highly selective if judged by those who succeed in taking a degree. It is selective with something that suggests the ferocity of selection in the biological world.

It would certainly be false to say that this failure of entering

students to take degrees represents nothing but wasted effort. Many who finish only a year or two doubtless profit by their studies. But as one watches the process one cannot seriously doubt that there is a great amount of waste in it. One cannot avoid the conclusion that entirely too many of these students get no return that is commensurate with the time and money they have spent, or with the effort and the money that the state has expended upon them. There is certainly some loss of money, though that is the least important factor in the situation. The serious losses fall upon the human values concerned. No one can imagine that it is good for a young person to spend a year or two trying to do something for which he is ill fitted, following studies in which he is not really interested, and gaining a slipshod acquaintance with subjects he will never know enough about to appreciate or use effectively. No sympathetic person can believe, surely, that a boy of eighteen is inspired to make the most of whatever abilities he has by doing a year or two of unsatisfactory work, pending the time when he shall become sufficiently discouraged to drop out. A sense of failure is not as a rule the soil in which future successes grow. Finally, there is serious loss in this state of affairs even for those students who succeed in their university work. For the university cannot possibly do its best work when its classes, especially in the first two years, are filled in a large measure by students who ought not to be there. In the last resort the standards of a university are set as much by the students as by the teachers. The loss to the university lies in its inability to do from the start the very best that it might do for those students who really want and need a university education.

Now there is, of course, an easy way out, but like most easy ways, it is the wrong way. Just here the philosophy of mediocrity crops up

with the inspiration that the right thing to do is to coddle the poor student. If he is discouraged by failing in his work, pass him. Encourage everybody. Be democratic. Pretend that all students are equally promising. Set a pace that everyone can keep. In short, bore the good students to death while you wait for the slow ones to catch up. But this is not an argument; it is arrant sentimentality. There is no kindness in teaching a person what he really does not need to know, or in encouraging a person to go on with what he is really unfitted to do. There is no democracy in fostering the illusion that excellence does not matter and that anybody can succeed at whatever he turns his hand to. This sort of sentimentality would turn the university into a fool's paradise. Students are going to succeed or fail in a world that needs trained faculties and judges a man mostly by what he can do. There is going to be very little sentiment wasted on students after they are out of school, and the sooner they realize it the better. In the long run nothing is more unkind than sentimental kindness. True humanity and true democracy in education consists in helping people to find out what they can do well and in giving them the training needed to do it. University education is not a panacea; it is a rather special kind of training for a fairly unusual sort of person.

The truth is that no university which is supported with money taken from all the people of the state can justify itself merely by the number of its students. The disproportion is too great between the number who benefit directly and those who cannot in any case avail themselves of the university's services. There must be at the present time in the state of Ohio somewhere near four hundred and fifty thousand boys and girls between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, that is, of about the age to go to the university. Suppose then that we have on this campus some ten thousand students, while in all the state

supported colleges of the state we have somewhere near twice that number. It will still be true that only one or two in forty-five of those who are of the right age actually profit in their own persons by what the state provides. Suppose that those who go to the university be increased in any fantastic way you choose to imagine, that for example the number be doubled. Would the argument be much better if the ratio were three to forty-five? In any case the argument from numbers alone is bound to be fatally weak. For on the score of numbers alone, how can you justify taking money from all the people of a state in order to give an expensive education to one boy or girl, while more than forty are unable to avail themselves of the same privilege?

In any case the state universities must be justified not by the number of students they teach but by the intrinsic importance of university education and by the quality of the work they do. The benefit which states derive from their universities cannot be measured by the proportion of the population that passes in and out at the university's doors. In every civilized community those callings which require especially a well-trained mind and a high degree of artistic or scientific skill have an importance out of all proportion to the number of persons who practice them. The physicians upon whom your health and happiness largely depend, the lawyers to whom you turn for counsel and who largely protect your rights, the teachers who educate your children, the journalists who bring you the news of the day together with their comments on it, the business men who manage your significant enterprises, the engineers who direct your more technical industries, the men and women who, outside their particular callings, set the higher standards of taste and civic virtue, are not important because they are numerous. In any society we can imagine they will

still be a small part of the total. They are important in so far as they do their work well, and the contribution which they make to civilization is a contribution of excellence.

And where shall a state look for men and women of this kind if not to their state university? For what does a university exist except to train men and women of this kind -- men and women freed from the bonds of superstition and convention, imbued with the best that has been thought and written in the past, clearsighted to grasp the problems of the present, endowed with the creative imagination to see new possibilities, open-minded to follow an argument even to an unwelcome conclusion, patient and judicial to weigh evidence and to test their ideas relentlessly before the bar of fact, courageous to follow their conviction once it has been formed, humanly sympathetic to rise above the interests of their class and place. Here or nowhere is your university justified. In so far as it can train and elicit qualities like these, no price is too great to pay for it. The argument for excellence is amply strong to carry all the load that can be put upon it.

Those who profess to be learned in reading the popular mind will perhaps tell us that such an ideal for the state universities is not sanctioned by public opinion, that whatever university men may think, the people at large, who pay the bills, want a university in which the standards will not be too severe and in which the average rather than the gifted student will be at home. Perhaps it is true that such a public opinion now exists, but if it does, the simple answer is that it must be changed. Moreover, it can be changed. What we call vaguely public opinion on any subject gets its tone mostly from the persons who are really interested. In the case of a state university this is

mostly the alumni, who have had a chance to test what the university's degree is really worth, the school superintendents and high school principals, who are closely in touch with the training of students to enter the university, and the trustees, who are responsible to the state for a far-sighted direction of the university's policies. These persons are the interested and the instructed nucleus by which the larger and vaguer public opinion ought to be formed. These are the natural leaders; if they want quality, the public opinion of the state will follow them.

In this matter of public opinion and its effect upon universities, we shall do well not to imagine a vain thing. An unenlightened public opinion can no doubt starve and ruin a state university, but it has very little power to make good university education anything but what it is. In science, in art, and in scholarship there is a standard of excellence which neither a state, nor all the people in a state, can change, whatever they may think about it. A scientific investigation will still add or not add to our knowledge and use of nature, whether people like it or not. The worth of a poem, or a novel, or a picture is not fixed by counting heads. For this reason the kind of education that universities give is not needed merely because people think so. The need exists deep in the structure of society; public opinion does well to understand the need but it does not create the need. Even a university's reputation does not depend upon public opinion in the usual sense of the word. The public that finally judges a university and the value of its teaching is the world of scholars within and without the state. It is <u>this</u> public which finally awards or withholds the repute of work well done.

The propriety of high standards and the selection of suitable students is in fact just as clear in the state universities as in those

that are privately endowed. The public pays the interest on the endowments of private institutions of higher learning as surely as it pays taxes. In both cases the public must look for its return to a high standard of proficiency on the part of graduates in those callings, professions, and walks of life for which a university education is the best preparation. Let it be repeated that the proper work of the university, the work which it alone can do, is indispensable. But that work, to be worth anything at all, calls for special abilities and special interests. All universities, no matter how supported, must be justified, if at all, by the excellence of the work they do. And selection is inseparable from excellence. Selection of a kind you already have in the process that reduces five entrants to one graduate. The question is not whether you will select, but when and how. For wise selection is not the simple reduction of numbers; in itself a small number is no better than a large one. The purpose is to help boys and girls to find the places where they can do their best work, and it is the part of wisdom to do this as quickly as possible, as accurately as possible, and with the smallest possible loss to the human values at stake. So far as the university is concerned this means picking out at the beginning the students who are destined for a degree and avoiding the heavy toll of failures which is incident to our present system of selection.

How then shall we answer the question, Are state universities different? If we pass over details and go at once to the heart of the matter, the answer is emphatically, No. In its underlying purpose a state university is exactly like a privately endowed university. Both exist to preserve and extend those higher reaches of science and art and technology without which a civilized community can neither hold its own nor progress. Both impart a specialized

training to students who must always be a small proportion of the total population and who possess interests and capacities somewhat unusual as compared with the total range of human interests and capacities. In both, the success of the training depends upon finding as soon as possible the group of somewhat unusual students who are qualified to take it. In both the success of the training will be limited if effort is distracted in the direction of teaching a considerable proportion of unsuitable students. In both the excellence of the work done is the condition of its being really useful. In the end the state universities must follow the policy already adopted by the best private universities of selecting their students from among those applicants for admission who have the interest and the capacity for a relatively high type of intellectual effort. For in this way only can they conform to the ideal of a university education and justify the confidence which a really enlightened public opinion reposes in them. As students, ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class, you have had the chance to test the validity of this conclusion. As alumni you have the chance to aid in making it effective.